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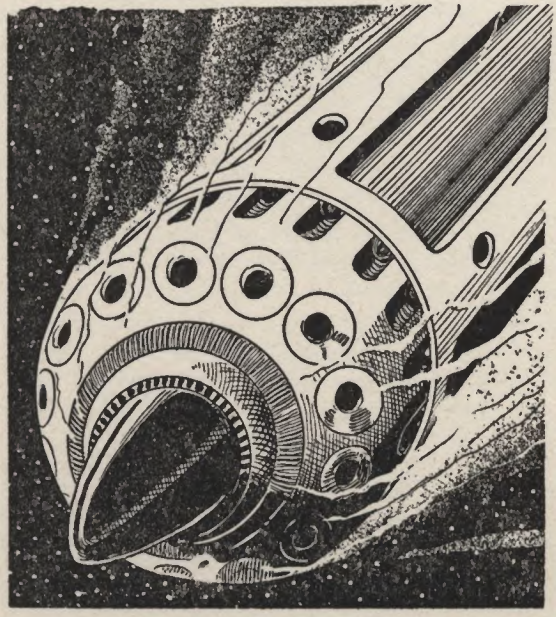
Rhythm Rides the Rocket

By Bob Olsen



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★ RHYTHM RIDES ★ THE ROCKET

By Bob Olsen

HAVING piloted the Spaceship Goddard through that perilous zone of pelting planetoids and ghostly derelicts which make the region between Mars and Jupiter a nerve-wracking nightmare for space-pilots, Captain Timothy Verger felt an urgent need for rest and relaxation. Turning the controls over to Alphonse LeDoux, the regular Interplanetary Company's pilot, he opened the door which led to the main cabin.

On the threshold he paused and gingerly inhaled a disgusted sniff. The place reeked — not that Captain Verger was particularly squeamish about odors. A veteran space-flyer does not expect the interior of a rocket-ship to smell like a spruce forest. The sensations which offended Verger's nostrils were not exactly unpleasant — but they certainly did not belong in an interplanetary freighter. They were feminine smells — the mingled fragrance of talcum powder, cold cream and perfume. And if the odors were incongruous, the sights and the sounds which accompanied them were even more so.

The cabin was crowded with women. There must have been at least twenty of them, ranging in ages from eighteen to twenty-five. All of them were playing lustily on horns, clarionettes and other musical instruments.

"Of all the unheard-of things!" Verger thought as he ducked beneath the flare of an enormous tuba and sidestepped to avoid the sudden thrust of a trombone slide. "A band rehearsal in the space-lanes, a million miles from nowhere — and a female band at that!"

Squeezing between the compactly grouped musicians, Verger could not help brushing against the elbow of the bass drummer. She was somewhat older than the others — perhaps

thirty, he guessed. Although she was not exactly what a television scout would call glamorous, she was the kind of girl who would interest almost any man except a middle-aged, chronic woman-hater like Verger. Framed in a cloud of wavy red hair, her full red lips, pert nose and humorous eyes told an eloquent story of wholesome good nature.

As Verger slid past her, mumbling an inaudible apology, she flashed a white-toothed smile at him, shocking him with a deliberate brazen wink. Though he tried to look stern and indifferent, he had to smile back at her in spite of himself.

Opening the door of the men's stateroom, Verger gave a cursory greeting to Professor Anderson, who was seated before a small bench which he had rigged up in one corner of the cramped quarters. He was working on a peculiar contraption which looked like a small horn attached to a strange jumble of coils and tubes. Knowing that Anderson was an inventor as well as a composer and music-teacher, Verger assumed that the device was some new kind of band instrument.

Weary and nervous, the pilot crawled into his hammock and attempted to relax. It was a difficult task. Hard as he tried, he could not shake off the feeling of tense anxiety which disturbed and tormented him.

"There's nothing to worry about," he tried to assure himself. "LeDoux is an experienced pilot with almost as many space hours to his credit as I have."

Nevertheless Captain Verger couldn't squeeze from his mind the thought that the safety of this ship with its three men and its twenty women depended on him and on him alone.

In the hope of clearing up certain matters which puzzled him, Verger began talking to Anderson.

"Would you mind giving me the low-down on this crazy voyage?" he asked.

Anderson countered with, "Do you mean to say you don't know why you are here?"

"Frankly, I don't," the Captain admitted. "My orders simply directed me to report to the Earth Republic spaceport on Mars and to pilot the space-freighter Goddard with a cargo of supplies for the thermolium mines on Ganymede. It was somewhat surprising for me to find out most of the so-called 'supplies' were female bipeds and peck-horns stained with lipstick."

ANDERSON laughed. "It does seem rather incongruous, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Verger agreed. "Whatever that word means, it's all right. What I want to know is — why?"

"Being an inveterate bachelor, I suppose you wouldn't understand," Anderson smiled. "However, since you have spent many years on far-flung planets and satellites, perhaps you can realize that the lives of the eighty or ninety men who were exiled to the thermolium mines on Ganymede are not very pleasant."

Verger sniffed. "They must be cream-puffs if they kick about Ganymede. It has the nicest climate in the solar system — when you get used to it."

"It isn't the climate the men object to," Anderson amplified. "Their discontentment is due to being deprived of things they formerly enjoyed. Most of them were married just before they embarked for Ganymede, you know."

"First I heard of that," was Verger's abbreviated comment.

Anderson continued: "The government promised to transport the exiles' wives to Ganymede as soon as it could feasibly be accomplished. This is the first ship-load."

"Do you mean to tell me that all those female horn-tooters are married to Ganymedian exiles?" Verger exclaimed.

Anderson nodded.

"But why the trombones and saxophones?"

"That also is part of the campaign for more contented miners," the inventor explained. "A ballot discloses that, next to their wives, the thing most needed by the exiles is music."

"I see," Verger grinned. "A variation of the old wheeze about wine, women and song."

"Something like that. And, since liquor is taboo, only the women and the music remained. On this first trip there was room enough for only one-fourth of the wives who wanted to join their husbands. They were about to draw lots when some one thought of the bright idea of selecting first the women who could play band instruments, thereby providing musical consolation for the benefit of the less fortunate men whose wives were delayed in transit."

"I suppose you were the one who picked the horn-blowers," Verger assumed.

"Yes, and since an immediate departure was imperative, I was ordered to accompany them and to train them during the

long, tedious voyage. I feel quite proud of their progress. By the way, what do you think of our band of exiles' wives?"

Verger parried the question with another one: "Did you say all those girls are married — even thae red-headed bass-drummer?"

"Oh, you mean Helen Green?" Anderson smiled. "Yes, she's married — like all the rest of the girls."

"The tramp — the chiseling tramp," Verger murmured to himself as he turned his face to the wall and fell asleep.

CHAPTER II

Forced Landing!

FOLLOWING hours of fitful slumber during which he dreamed of all the perils and catastrophes that could possibly bedevil a space-ship, Verger awoke with a start which would have bounced him out of his hammock had he not taken the precaution of zipping himself in. More than ever before, a premonition of impending disaster crowded into his worried mind.

Squeezing a handful of water from a drinking tube, he quickly washed his hands and face, hurried to the control room and strapped himself into the starboard control seat.

"Shall I relieve you, Al?" he panted.

LeDoux glanced at the chronometer and said, "No, thanks, Tim. I still have forty-seven minutes left of my shift." Then, seeming to sense a note of tension in his friend's voice, he exclaimed, "What's the matter, old man?"

"Oh, nothing," Verger assured him. "You know, of course, that I never interfere with the work of another flyer. No dual-seat piloting for me."

"For Pete's sake, spill it!" Alphonse cried. "What's wrong with the way I'm running this ash-can?"

"If you don't mind my saying so, I think you're shooting too darn close to Callisto."

"Maybe so," LeDoux conceded. "We're several hours behind our schedule. I figured I might make it up by using the full force of Jupiter's gravitational pull. That meant shaving a slice out of Callisto's stratosphere, but we have plenty of momentum to carry us past the satellite without any risk."

"Let's hope so," was Verger's pessimistic response. "I'd hate to make a forced landing on Callisto."

"Why?" LeDoux wanted to know. "Isn't Callisto inhabited?"

"Sure, it's inhabited. That's the trouble. The natives of Callisto are unquestionably the most fearful and the most ruthless fiends in the known universe."

"What's so fearful about them?" his companion asked.

"Well, for one thing, they're too blamed curious."

"Curious?" LeDoux questioned. "Is that such a terrible crime?"

"It is when it is carried to extremes, like they do. Maybe you haven't heard, but the Callisto boys have an unpleasant habit of grabbing every human being they can get hold of, merely for the playful purpose of cutting them open to find out what makes them tick. Vivisection, I guess you'd call it."

"Nice people!" was LeDoux's comment.

"Yeah, and the worst of it is that there's nothing we humans can do about it. No weapon known to man can harm them. They shed lethal rays like a duck sheds water. Bullets from old-fashioned machine guns go right through them without apparent damage. I ought to know because—" Leaving his sentence suspended in space, Verger exclaimed, "Leaping Luna! What's that?"

Staring through the thick, super-transparent window in the direction which the captain indicated, LeDoux saw a weird, lavender-hued beam shoot out from the surface of Callisto. For two or three tense seconds it whipped around in a spiral path which centered the beam right on the nose of the Goddard, bathing the craft with its throbbing, blinding glare.

There was a jolt which nearly snapped the strong bands of webbing which strapped the two men into their control seats. Followed then that horrible, oppressive feeling of excessive weight, which told the experienced space-pilots that their velocity was being decelerated rapidly—far more rapidly than

any sensible pilot would dare to retard his flight by means of braking rockets.

Like a swimmer trying to fight his way out of the clutches of a dangerous riptide, LeDoux strove to steer the Goddard diagonally across the powerful current of quivering, menacing energy, but his attempts to maneuver the rocket-ship out of the beam's perilous influence were fruitless.

With inexorable power, the beam seemed to be sucking the space-ship toward the surface of the satellite, while at the same time it was retarding the Goddard's terrific speed.

CLOSER and closer loomed the enormous globe of Callisto, until it blotted out everything else. Finally, with an almost imperceptible jar, the rocket-ship pancaked into a nest of grotesque vegetation which clothed the perilous satellite.

Verger, who had closed his eyes to guard himself against blindness, opened them just in time to see a preposterous object thrust itself out of an enormous hole only a few feet away, and wrap itself about the space-ship. It was not a snake, nor was it exactly similar to the tentacle of a large cephalopodous animal. There was something about its creepy, slithering movements which suggested the pseudopodia of an amoebean organism, if one could stretch one's imagination sufficiently to conceive of an amoeba of such cosmic size.

Tearing his fascinated gaze away from this horrible object, which seemed to be holding the space-ship imprisoned in its ominous embrace, Verger unbuckled the straps of his control seat and hurried back to the women's quarters. Fortunately, all the girls had been zipped snugly in their spring-braced hammocks at the moment when the beam had struck the space-ship. Although they were all somewhat shaken and badly frightened, none of them was seriously injured.

CHAPTER THREE

Music on Ganymede

THE SPOT where the space-ship made its compulsory landing was like a small park. It was divided into geometrically fashioned beds of fantastic, crawling vines, vivid with huge, gaudy flowers and purple-hued, spongy foliage. Surrounding the open space were a number of flat, cylindrical objects which resembled the pieces on an enormous checker-board. Swinging open, like the lids of gigantic waffle-irons, these cylinders belched forth a host of preposterous creatures.

Comparable in size to walruses, their orange-hued bodies were shaped like gigantic slugs or shell-less snails. Their movements, however, were anything but snail-like. With incredible swiftness they flowed toward the space-ship from all directions. As if arrested by a sharp command, they all stopped before they reached the Goddard, ringing it at a respectable distance with an oval wall of pulsating bodies.

After a tense period of seeming indecision, one of their number separated from the others and oozed boldly across the intervening space.

Through the crystal-clear window, Captain Verger could plainly distinguish the creature's face, which, fantastic as it was, weirdly suggested a superior degree of intelligence, such as only human beings can claim. Ears and nostrils it undoubtedly possessed, the former being spirally coiled, like cinnamon rolls, and the latter resembling the muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun. Unusually large was the mouth, which was armed with three rows of greenish teeth. Of all the grotesque features, the most peculiar were its organs of vision. Telescopic, like those of a lobster, its glaring, lidless eyes were mounted on long stalks so that they could be turned in all directions and focussed by drawing them in and out.

For a breathless minute, those weird eyes explored the interior of the space-ship. Then something resembling a three-fingered hand protruded from the creature's shoulder, stretched out until it became a long arm and made an unmistakable beckoning gesture. "Come out," it said as clearly as if it had uttered those very words. Verger answered with a shake of his head, which, though silent, was emphatically eloquent.

Within the crowded cabin of the space-ship, not a sound was heard. The girls had tumbled out of their hammocks and were huddled together, too frightened to speak or even to scream. Like birds fascinated by a serpent, they gazed fearfully at that fiendish face; and when it disappeared from the window, they simultaneously turned their hypnotized eyes on Captain Verger.

It was Helen Green, the red-headed drummer-girl who, assuming the post of spokeswoman, broke the silence. "Well, Captain," she said in a voice which she tried hard to keep from trembling, "What do we do now?"

Verger startled them all by shouting, "I'll tell you what to do! Get into your uniforms! Unpack your horns! Let's have a good, rousing tune right now!"

For a while they stared at him as if they feared he had lost his mind. Professor Anderson, who was standing close to Verger whispered, "Do you really mean that, Captain?"

"Certainly I mean it!" The pilot yelled. "Since you are in charge of the band, will you please see to it that my orders are carried out?"

"But why the uniforms? I don't —"

"There's no time for argument," Verger interrupted him. "It's extremely important that the girls dress in their uniforms. Please request them to do so at once!"

A MOMENT later, when the three men were shut in the control compartment in order that the girls could use the main cabin as a dressing room, Verger apologized to Anderson, "Sorry I had to be so blunt, Professor! You see, it was apparent that all the ladies were in a blue funk. Things are going to be tough enough for us without a bunch of hysterical women on our hands. I figured that something had to be done to distract their minds and there's nothing that absorbs the interest of a female like dolling up in fancy duds."

"I see," Anderson exclaimed. "So that was the reason why you insisted on the uniforms."

"Not entirely. I had other reasons. These Callisto babies are smart people — a lot smarter than we are in most things.

But there's one subject they don't know anything at all about, and that's music!"

"And your idea is to stage a band concert for their benefit?" asked Anderson.

"Exactly."

"And what do you think will happen then?"

"I don't know. Anything can happen. But, no matter what they do about it, we can't be any worse off than we are right now. Tell your girls to toot like they've never tooted before. Let's hope that the Callisto boys like it. If they do, it may save us."

"What makes you think so?" Anderson asked.

"Because these babies are known to be the most inquisitive beings in the universe. If I am right about their not knowing anything about music, your band is sure to arouse their curiosity. They'll want to find out all about it, and they can't very well do that if they cut the gizzards out of the musicians. Do you get the idea?"

While Verger and Anderson were talking, LeDoux had kept close watch through the windows of the control room. Suddenly he exclaimed, "Look what's coming now!"

A queer-looking machine was slowly approaching the spaceship. It was like a combination of a steam-shovel and a pile driver. Suspended by means of a cable from a long boom, a metal ball, which must have weighed several tons, was swinging back and forth like a colossal pendulum.

"What do you suppose it is?" Anderson whispered tensely.

"Whatever it is, it looks like bad news!" exclaimed Verger. "My guess is that they intend to use it to batter a hole in our shell. We've got to stop them from doing that. If they wrecked the ship we'd never be able to get away from here."

"What can we do about it?" LeDoux demanded. "You said yourself that no human weapons have any effect on them."

"There's only one thing to do," Verger replied. "And that is to open the hatch before that thing-a-ma-gig starts massaging our hull."

Without giving any warning, he flung open the door of the main cabin. Most of the girls were already dressed in their vivid, purple and green uniforms. Two of them, who were still partially undressed, uttered little screams, but Captain Verger paid no attention to them. Striding to the circular hatch, he

quickly unscrewed the ponderous clamps and slid the door open.

Then he turned and shouted, "Hurry, girls! There isn't a moment to lose. All of you get your instruments to working and follow me."

"What are we going to play?" someone squealed.

"Play anything—any snappy march will do!"

Anderson came to the rescue with the command, "Play 'The March of the Rocketeers'."

THE GIRLS raised their instruments and were just about to start playing when Verger shouted, "One moment, please. We've all got to be in this—the men as well as the women. Otherwise they may get the idea that the men aren't needed in the band and will start to carve us up. How about it, Professor? Have you any extra instruments?"

Anderson shook his head.

"Any objects that resemble musical instruments will do. Where's that gimmick you were working on?"

"You mean my high-frequency sound projector? I'll get it right away," Anderson dashed into the stateroom, returning immediately with his invention.

"O.K. You march along with the girls. Make believe you're playing on your dohickey. I'll pretend to play on this monkey wrench. LeDoux, you blow on your ray gun—but be careful you don't get absent minded and pull the trigger."

Stepping to the open hatch, Captain Verger yelled, "O.K., girls! Now play like you've never played before! One! Two! Three! Four! Let's go!" With the blaring band streaming after him, and with his ridiculous monkey wrench pressed against his lips, he strode forth to the soil of the hostile satellite.

It was indeed an astounding spectacle. Arrayed in their vividly colored uniforms, their hearts thumping with excitement, the musical wives of the exiled miners played and strutted as if they knew their lives depended on their skill.

Pretending to pay no attention to the beasts who still

formed an ominous ring around the space-ship, Verger waded through a tangle of vegetation to what looked like a walk or beaten path. Along this he marched and the ring of slug-men opened to let the band pass through.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Captain Verger watched the natives, for he realized that the fate of his band hung on one thing and one thing only, and that was the reaction of its audience.

At first, the only effect he discerned was one of astonishment. Obviously the Callistonians were taken completely by surprise. They didn't know what to do, and so they did nothing except follow this amazing procession.

Doubling around in a wide circle, Verger led the band back toward the space-ship. Like children watching a circus parade, the natives formed a lane, along which the musicians had to pass. It was then that Captain Verger noticed something that gave him relieved encouragement. Practically all of the listeners were swaying back and forth, keeping exact time with the catchy strains of the stirring march. It was apparent that, even though they were ignorant of music, they certainly had a sense of rhythm. None of them made any attempts to molest the human beings as they marched back and reentered the space ship.

CHAPTER IV

The Understudies

KNOWING the Callistonian's reputation for inquisitiveness, Verger fully expected that some of them would follow the band into the space-ship. They surprised him, however, by moving away from the Goddard instead of toward it.

In a cleared space which was some distance away but close enough so that the occupants of the ship could see them clearly, the natives of the satellite gathered together, forming a huge circle with their heads all pointed toward the center.

Apparently they were holding a conference or town meeting to decide what to do about these unprecedented eventualities.

Verger took advantage of this interlude to make a thorough examination of the weird tentacle which was still coiled about the Goddard, shackling it firmly to the unfriendly satellite.

Calling to Anderson, he said, "You're a scientist, Professor. Suppose you give this thing the once over and see if you can make anything out of it."

The inventor inspected the snake-like object minutely, using the magnifying glass to supplement his naturally keen vision. Finally he remarked: "It looks like protoplasm."

"You mean you think it's something living?"

Anderson nodded.

"But how could anything living be so enormous?" Verger doubted. "Surely you don't believe that an underground monster could have a tentacle as big as that?"

"Perhaps the satellite itself is a living organism," Anderson suggested.

LeDoux, who had overheard the conversation, remarked, "How utterly ridiculous!"

"I wouldn't say that," Verger disagreed. "I've seen too many strange things in my time to call anything ridiculous."

"But if this satellite was really alive, we'd certainly know about it," LeDoux protested.

"Not necessarily," said Anderson. "Do you think the fleas and microbes that crawl the hairy forests on the surface of a Saint Bernard dog have any conception of the living thing which they inhabit?"

While LeDoux and Anderson were talking, Verger had disappeared into the space-craft, from which he presently emerged brandishing a large, razor-edged axe.

"We'll soon find out whether it's alive or not," he cried, as he swung the powerful weapon over his head and slashed it with a mighty effort into the thing.

The axe penetrated the substance as easily as if it had been made of jelly, in fact the blade sank completely out of sight. Almost instantly the wound closed, leaving the outer surface intact. When Verger tried to withdraw the axe, he found that he did not have strength enough to do so.

"Here, fellows, give me a hand!" he yelled.

All three of them tugged at the axe-handle without being able to dislodge the blade. Finally they strained so hard that

the hickory shaft cracked and the portion which was attached to the blade was sucked out of sight.

For an instant Verger stood with his mouth open, gazing foolishly at the broken rod in his hand. Then he swore and exclaimed, "Now, just what does that prove?"

Anderson shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"If you ask me," said LeDoux, "it proves that we're stuck here for the rest of our lives — which probably won't be long enough to become tedious."

MEANWHILE, the natives of Callisto had apparently completed their conference, for they started back toward the space-ship. When he saw them approaching, Verger rushed inside and shouted, "Play, girls. Your customers must have liked your routine, because they're coming back for more."

Taking the lead, one of the saxophone players blew an introductory measure of an old, familiar dance tune, and the rest of the band lustily joined in.

If it had not been for the seriousness of their predicament, the three men would have derived a great deal of amusement from the subsequent behavior of the Callisto natives.

First they marched, or rather crawled, around the space-ship in single file, keeping time to the music with graceful movements of their sinuous bodies. Then they separated into groups, performing some remarkable, rhythmic maneuvers, which seemed to be both spontaneous and original.

"They're dancing!" LeDoux exclaimed. "It's sort of an ancient square dance — I believe it was called the quadrille."

"Looks more like the Big Apple to me," Anderson remarked.

"Big Apple?" Verger questioned. "What in the Solar System is that?"

"It's the name of a dance which was popular back in the Twentieth Century. I remember seeing the dance depicted by some motion pictures which were kept in a museum to show the customs of human insects called 'jitter bugs' who lived in what they called the 'terrible thirties'."

"Very interesting," was Captain Verger's comment. "All I can say is, 'On with the dance! Let joy be unrefined!' If it will keep the minds of those slug-men out of mischief — more power to rhythm!"

"Looks as if they won't bother us for a while at least," Anderson remarked. "I believe I shall take advantage of this interlude to make the final adjustments on my invention. It is practically completed, you know."

"Go to it, by all means," Verger urged him. "And, by the way, Professor, just what is the nature of that contraption of yours?"

"I call it a High Frequency Sound Projector. If you're interested, just step into my laboratory and I'll explain it to you while I am working on it."

A moment later, when they were in the tiny stateroom which Anderson facetiously called his laboratory, the scientist began: "My High Frequency Sound Projector is merely a device for producing, focussing and projecting super-sonic vibrations, or waves which are similar to sound, but have enormously greater frequencies. No doubt you know that vibrations which are audible to the human ear range from 24 per second to about 40,000 per second. My device develops frequencies as high as a million vibrations per second."

"Did you originate the idea?" Verger asked.

"Indeed not," Anderson hastened to state. "All I did was to carry on the work of other scientists. Early in the Twentieth Century, during the so-called 'World War,' supersonics were used to detect the presence of hostile submarines. While these high frequency sound-waves were being employed for this purpose, thousands of dead fishes were found floating on the surface of the ocean. It was suggested that these fishes might have been killed by the supersonic vibrations, and this assumption was subsequently verified by laboratory experiments."

"And is that what your dohickey is for — just to kill fishes?" Verger asked.

"It ought to do a great deal more than that," Anderson smiled. "The supersonics which killed small fishes had relatively low frequencies — only about 50,000 vibrations per second. My device develops frequencies of over a million vibrations per second."

"Does that mean that your gimmick will kill larger animals?"

The scientist answered, "I haven't tested it yet. But, reasoning by analogy, I believe it would be absolutely fatal to any larger animal, such as a human being, an elephant, or—"

"Or one of those Callisto devils!" the captain exclaimed. "Jumping Jupiter! Maybe you've got something there, Professor! No weapon that has been tried so far has been able to stop one of those babies; but perhaps your supersonic thing-a-ma-gig will do the trick!"

"That is a possibility," Anderson agreed. "However, since we have only one Super-Sonic Projector, I'm afraid we cannot wage a successful war against the entire population of Callisto."

"Not very well," Verger had to admit. "Nevertheless, I still have a hunch that your little dohickey is going to enable us to make our getaway."

PROFESSOR ANDERSON was about to ask Verger what he had in mind, when he heard a knock on the door of the state-room. In response to his invitation to enter, one of the women came in. It was Helen Green, the bass-drummer.

Startled by the expression on her face, the scientist said, "What's wrong, Mrs. Green? Why aren't you playing with the rest of the band?"

"I got fired!" was her astonishing statement.

"You got fired?" Anderson exclaimed. "What in the Universe are you raving about?"

"You know how it is," she grinned. "Unskilled labor is always the first to feel the pinch of unemployment. Anyone can play the bass drum. That's why I lost my job."

In a tone of exasperation which he tried hard to disguise, the professor said, "Please be more explicit, Mrs. Green. This is no time for facetiousness."

"I'm not trying to be funny," she assured him. "If you don't think I meant it when I said I got fired, take a look at the individual that copped my job!"

Following her suggestion, Anderson and Verger stepped to the door and looked into the main cabin. Just beyond the entrance they were astonished to see one of the slug-men. Armed with the padded drum-stick, it was pounding lustily on the base drum.

Nine or ten more of the Callisto natives were crowding the musicians. With their weird, telescopic eyes, the slug-men were intently watching all the movements which the girls were making.

"I believe I get the idea," Verger remarked. "Apparently they think that if they watch the musicians closely enough, they will learn how to play all the instruments themselves. Then they will organize a band of their own. As soon as they are able to get along without the human musicians, they will—"

Anderson kicked him in the shin just in time to stop him from finishing the sentence. If Helen noticed this by-play, she did not mention it. Instead she said, "Why don't you toss those kibitzers out, Captain?"

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Verger couldn't help smiling. "We can't very well toss them out, Mrs. Green, any more than a hired orchestra could evict the sponsor of a television program who took a notion to play with the instruments during a broadcast for which he was footing the bill."

By that time the enormous, fantastically glowing globe of Jupiter, upon which the daughter-moon of Callisto depended for light and warmth, had rolled down the sky until only a small portion of it was visible above the horizon. Evidently the slug-men abhorred being away from home after nightfall. At any rate, they departed as soon as the light began to wane, leaving behind them twenty tired, frightened girls and three worried men.

CHAPTER V

The Dying Tentacle

HALF AN hour later, Verger, Anderson, and LeDoux stole forth from the rocket-ship. Each of the men had a box-shaped object strapped on his back. All three of them carried coils of insulated wire, which they unwound as they advanced.

When they were about a mile from the Goddard, Anderson removed the burden from his back and opened the package. It was a small but remarkably efficient phonograph, which was equipped with a powerful loud speaker and a device for automatically changing records.

After Professor Anderson had attached one of the wires to the phonograph and had adjusted the mechanism, he covered it with vines. Then they walked for approximately another mile in a direction which took them away from the space-ship at a slightly different angle. At this point, which happened to be in the midst of a thicket, they unpacked the second phonograph and connected it up to one of the insulated wires. The third phonograph was similarly installed and camouflaged at a point about three miles distant from the Goddard.

Guided by the wires, the three Earthmen tramped back to the space-ship. They had scarcely reached their destination when ghostly tongues of magenta, orange and lavender began to flame above the distant horizon, giving warning of the impending dawn of Jupiter.

"Hurry, fellows," Captain Verger cried. "Al, will you please wake up the ladies? Tell them we're going for a little hike and that each one of them must bring her own instrument. Professor, will you please get your ultra-sound device? I'll carry the storage batteries."

"What's the idea?" LeDoux demanded.

"I'll tell you later. Time's a-wasting, so let's get going!"

A few moments later he was leading the entire party toward a thickly wooded forest which was about two hundred meters distant, on the opposite side of the space-ship from the places where the phonographs had been concealed.

In accordance with Verger's instructions, LeDoux carried the three coils of wire, unwinding them as he advanced.

When they had penetrated the woods far neough to be completely concealed, the captain called a halt and proceeded to elucidate his peculiar orders.

"This is just a little game of hide and seek," he explained. "All you have to do is keep out of sight and notice what happens."

Peeping through the spongy foliage at the edge of the forest, he watched the slug-men as they emerged from their homes and flocked toward the space-ship. He waited until twenty or thirty of them had entered the Goddard and had subsequently poured out again, rushing about in apparent excitement. Then he connected one of the wires to the storage battery.

From the distant loud-speaker came the faint but unmistakeable sounds of a brass band playing a stirring march in six-eight time. The slug-men must have heard it, for they all stopped and turned their heads in the direction of the concealed phonograph.

For an instant they hesitated; then, like rats following the Pied Piper, they all trooped after the mysterious music, which they obviously assumed was being produced by the band of Earth-Folk.

Verger glanced at his wrist-watch, estimating the amount of time which the Callisto natives would require to reach the first phonograph. Then he disconnected the wires, waited a while, and switched the current to the second phonograph. In a similar manner he timed the intervening interval before connecting the third phonograph to the battery.

Having thus tricked the enemy into a wild goose chase, Captain Verger herded his party back toward the space-ship.

"Don't go in yet, ladies," he ordered. Then to Anderson he said, "Let's see what your supersonic dohickey will do to that tentacle thing that's holding our ship down."

ACTING on this suggestion, Anderson aimed his invention at the thick coil of sinew which held the Goddard captive, adjusted the mechanism carefully, and turned on the power.

The thing began to writhe like a python in its death throes. Captain Verger fancied he could almost hear his beloved

rocket-ship groan as the massive coils tightened convulsively around it. But the staunch plates of super-alloy, built to withstand the terrific pressures incident to interplanetary travel, held firm.

Bracing himself to keep from falling to the ground, which was trembling like a miniature earth-quake, Anderson continued to shoot the powerful waves at the struggling tentacle. Finally, as the vibrations cut through he massive tissues, the folds which encircled the ship uncoiled and slithered inertly to the ground.

As he jumped backward to escape being hit by the dying thing, Anderson collided with Helen Green who had been standing right behind him.

He helped her to her feet and then said angrily, "What are you doing here? Why didn't you stand back where you belong, with the other girls?"

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I wanted to find out how that new gun of yours works, so I stood right behind you and watched you operate it."

A second later, when Captain Verger rushed into the Goddard's control compartment, he was nearly startled out of his wits. Barring his way was an enormous slug-man, who had obviously been left behind to guard the space-ship.

With a beastly snarl which sent cold shivers racing along the Earthman's spine, the creature seized him in its slimy arms and lifted his two hundred pound body as easily as if he had been a baby. Verger had barely time enough to shout a warning, "Look out, Al!" to LeDoux, when the monster whirled him about and crashed his head against the metal floor of the space-ship.

Drawing his ray-gun, LeDoux fired point-blank at the slug-fan. The powerful blast, which would have instantly disintegrated the body of a human being or other mammal, seemed to have absolutely no effect on the boneless body of the Callistonian. One of its weird, three-fingered hands shot out, grabbed the weapon and wrenched it out of LeDoux's grasp. Then it turned the ray-gun on the Earthman.

The mechanism, of course, was unfamiliar to the monstrosity, and this undoubtedly saved the space-pilot's life. After fumbling for a second or two in an unsuccessful attempt to operate the weapon, the creature dropped it with a grunt of disgust and tackled LeDoux with its powerful, sinuous arms.

Attracted by the noise, Helen Green and two of the other

girls rushed to the door of the control room. One of them uttered a low moan and fainted dead away. The second girl ran screaming out of the space-ship. Helen was the only one who kept her head. Turning to Professor Anderson, who was right behind her, she snatched the Supersonic Projector out of his hand, thrust its muzzle into the slug-man's side and squeezed the trigger.

Like a deflated balloon, the huge body collapsed, flopping to the floor in a shapeless mass. Into it plumped LeDoux, his fall cushioned as if he had dropped into a quivering heap of jelly.

Although he was trembling like an ash-tree in an earthquake, LeDoux, thanks to his long experience in facing emergencies, instantly took command of the situation.

"Quick, Anderson!" he shouted. "Make sure all the women are inside! Then close the hatch and clamp it tight! Girls! Climb into your hammocks instantly!"

As he was strapping himself into the control seat, he glanced through the observation ports. What he saw put extra speed into his fumbling fingers.

Already the natives of Callisto were rushing back to the Goddard. Apparently the tremors of the dying tentacle had told them that they had been outwitted. Although they were still nearly a mile away, they were racing along at such a rapid speed that their arrivel was only a matter of minutes. On they came — thousands of them. Even at a distance, LeDoux could sense the menace of their furious features and their threatening movements.

Nevertheless, LeDoux made sure that all the women were safe in their hammocks before he snapped on the gravity-nullifyer and sent the Goddard rocketing through Callisto's stratosphere.

CHAPTER VI

An Amazing Revelation

THREE days later, Captain Verger recovered consciousness. His head heavily bandaged, he was lying on a cot in a small white-walled room. The sickening odor of ether was in the air. Bending over him, he was surprised to see the kindly features of Professor Anderson.

"Where am I? What happened?" he asked tritely.

"You're in the Interplanetary Mining Company's hospital on Ganymede," Anderson told him. "I suppose you recall what happened to you in Callisto."

"The last thing I remember is when that blasted devil of a slug-man bashed my head against the floor of the Goddard."

Anderson nodded and said, "Luckily for you, your skull turned out to be a thick one. Instead of being cracked wide open as any ordinary head would have been under the circumstances, your cranium was only dented. The doctor says you'll recover from the concussion, but it will be at least a month before you will be able to pilot a space-ship."

"And what about the others—LeDoux, Helen Green and the girls of the band?"

"All of them are safe and sound." Then Anderson told him about the courage and resourcefulness which Helen had displayed when she saved the Earth-People from the Callistonian guard.

"Mrs. Green sure is a swell girl," Verger murmured.

"You don't know the half of it," the Professor declared. "It was Helen who risked her life to give you first aid while we were taking off from Callisto. All the rest of us were strapped into our hammocks and seats to protect ourselves against the rapid acceleration. Doctor Williams told me that you owe your life to the way she took care of you both on the Goddard and here."

"Do you mean to say that Helen has been my nurse at this hospital?"

"That's right," Anderson smiled, "and I wouldn't be surprised if that was Helen coming down the corridor right now!"

As Helen Green entered the dimly lighted room, her beaming, radiant face and her lustrous, red hair reminded Verger of noon-day sunshine on dear old Earth.

Without making a sound, Anderson tiptoed out of the room, leaving Verger alone with his beautiful nurse.

Her first actions and words astonished the hardened bachelor. Kneeling at his bedside with bowed head, she whispered, "Thank heaven you are all right!"

For a moment or two, neither of them spoke. Then Verger reached out and reverently stroked the lustrous, red curls which were pressed against the counterpane just above his chest.

"You're a wonderful woman, Mrs. Green," he murmured. "The lucky chap who married you sure drew a prize."

She surprised him by saying, "My name is not Mrs. Green —and I am not married."

"Then how did you get into the band, which was supposed to be composed exclusively of exiles' wives?" he demanded.

"Oh, that was easy. You see, the real Mrs. Green is a friend of mine. She was selected to join the band and fly to her husband, who is one of the miners here. At the showdown, she lost her nerve. Apparently, she lacked the — the intestinal fortitude that it takes to embark on a space voyage. When I heard she was going to quit, I got her to let me take her place. So here I am."

"But I still don't understand," Verger said. "If you haven't a husband here, why did you go on a journey which you must have known would be full of discomfort and danger?"

She grinned and replied, "Oh, I don't know. I guess it must have been the gypsy in my soul."

"Haven't you ever been married?" he asked.

"Never," she smiled. "I'm one of those things that's commonly called a spinster."

"That reminds me of a gag I heard a long time ago," Verger rejoined. "It seems that a high school girl, when asked to define that word, said, 'A spinster is the wife of a bachelor'." Then he added, "I guess you know that I am a bachelor, don't you?"

Helen laughed and replied, "How could I help knowing that? Everyone tells me that you are an incurable woman-hater. And that's the truth, isn't it, Capain Verger?"

"All except the tense of the verb," he corrected her. "They should have told you that I *was* a woman-hater until I met you — you plucky, red-headed angel, you!"

THE END

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